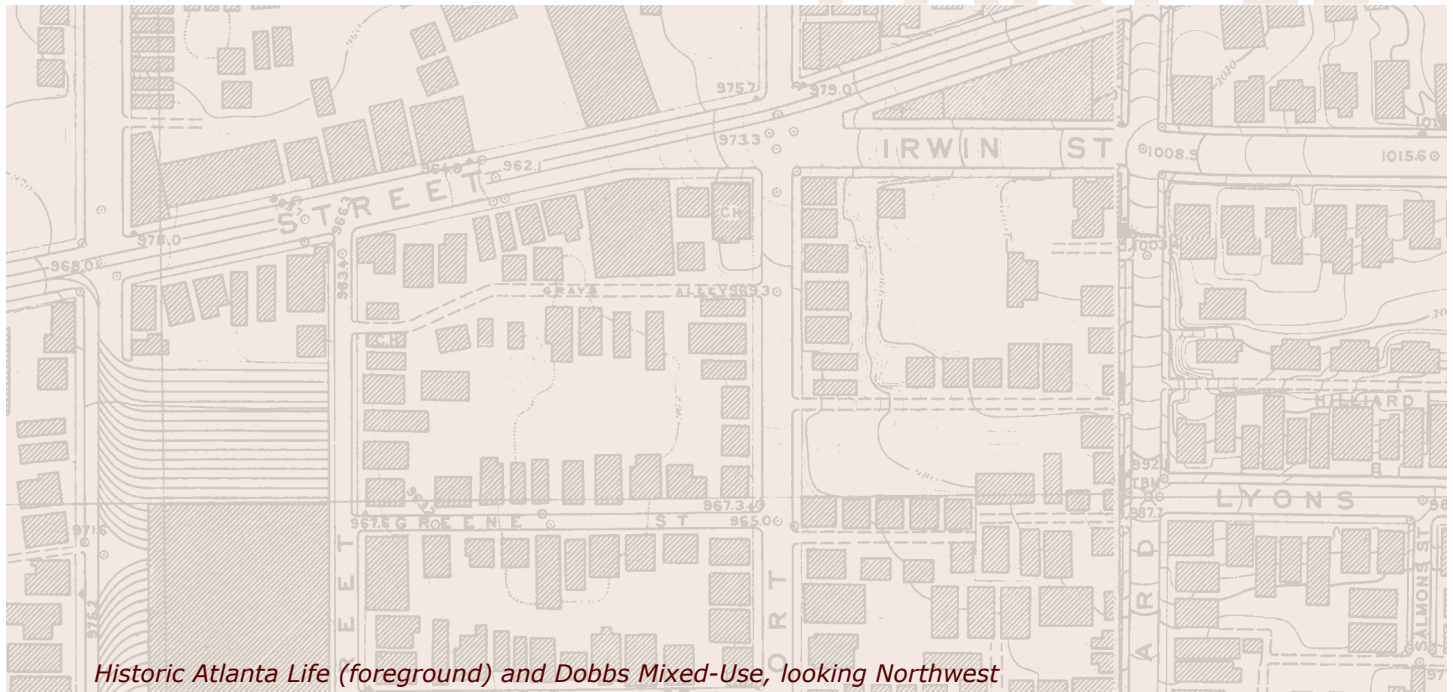




Butler - Auburn Redevelopment Plan Update

Part II : History



Historic Atlanta Life (foreground) and Dobbs Mixed-Use, looking Northwest



Part 2 Historical Framework

Sweet Auburn's history as the African-American cultural and commercial mecca makes it one of the most significant and celebrated areas in the Southeast. Added to this is Sweet Auburn's importance as the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. Where other cities boast of African-American heritage sites that focus on themes like the arts or political empowerment, or highlight the achievements of specific individuals, very few have the broad spectrum of elements that unite to tell the story of the joys and disappointments experienced by African-Americans in their long journey to recognition. This story is one of Atlanta and one of the Nation; its depth is only now beginning to be appreciated and celebrated as all Americans seek to rediscover the essential nature of the country.

Auburn is linked to both social history and the cultural cross-currents of the South. It was a regular stop on the tours of legendary blues, jazz and soul musicians, and gave rise to home-grown talent and renowned venues. Auburn was also the magnet for sharecroppers and dispossessed residents from rural towns that came to the big city after the Civil War to seek their fortunes. An entrepreneurial class emerged, forming some of the businesses that would endure into the twenty-first century. The nature of Atlanta as a rail hub brought fresh ideas and a sense of cosmopolitanism to Auburn that infused the neighborhood with a vitality unlike other similar-sized cities of the South. And as vitality created a sense of identity, so with identity came the recognition of the power of democracy and the fight to extend the vote.

The story of Sweet Auburn is written in memories and photographs, books and letters. It is also written in the streets and the buildings that line them; and in the actions to preserve and invigorate those places. This plan therefore looks to fuse the past and the future, to balance growth and preservation in a way that is mutually beneficial.

Figure 2.0:
Danneman's
Supermarket



(Image: GSU Archives, Lane Brother / Tracy O'Neil Collections)

2.1 Historical Context

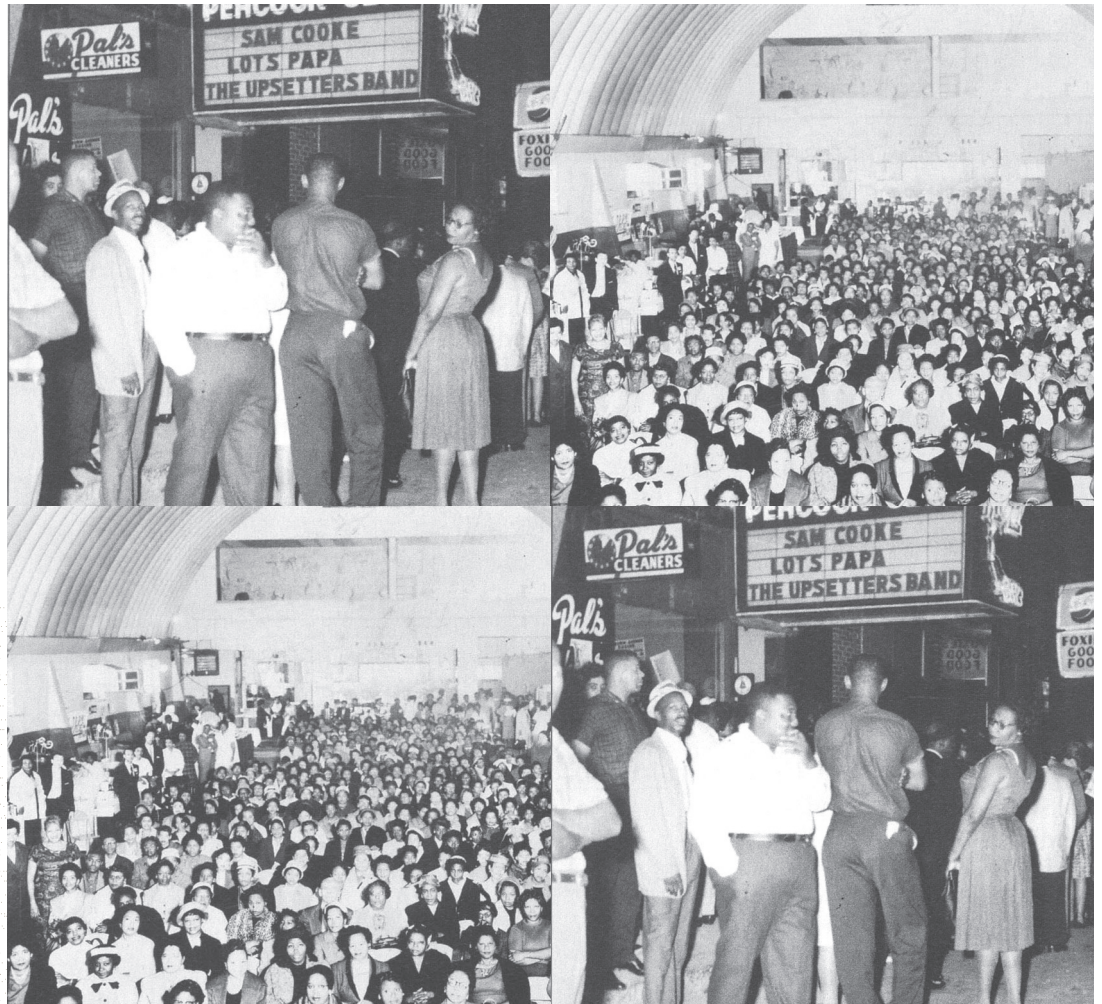
As one of the earliest African American enterprise areas in the country, the Sweet Auburn district flourished from the mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century. Originally named Wheat Street for Atlanta merchant Augustus Wheat, the locals petitioned the City to rename the street to Auburn Avenue - a name more stylish and grand to suit the street's changing character. Some of the earliest landmarks of this district were institutions such as Bethel African Methodist Church, Wheat Street Baptist Church and Ebenezer Baptist Church, which became the religious and social centers for the African American community. Businesses began to surround these institutions, most prominently black financial institutions, insurance companies and the supporting service industry. Many leaders and champions of the district such as W.E.B. DuBois, Henry Rucker, Heman Perry, Benjamin J. Davis, and Alonzo Herndon etc. worked towards building an economically vibrant community. John Wesley Dobbs, considered the unofficial mayor of the district said that the district was "paved in gold" as it competed with Peachtree Street in the 1930s and 1940s.

Around the same time, this thriving business district began attracting premier entertainment venues. Places such as the Top Hat Club (later named the Royal Peacock) and Club Ponciana hosted some of the nation's most prominent black entertainers. Along with the entertainment industry, Sweet Auburn also boasted of prominent fraternal organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons and Grand Order of the Odd Fellows which supported the business community. Earlier in 1920, the YMCA had made its home on Butler Street and soon became the center of recreation and social activities.

Figure 2.1.2:
Cultural Institutions

*Top: Top Hat Club,
Casino Ballroom*

*Bottom: Yates & Milton
Drugstore,
Carnegie Library*



Following the rise of commercial and cultural prominence, was the slow rise of political awareness amongst the residents and businessmen in this community. Two areas in Atlanta became the hub of political activity – Sweet Auburn District and Atlanta University Center. Community leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Hosea Williams and Rev. Ralph David Abernathy systematically united and mobilized the African American electorate in an effort to bring about social change. These efforts gradually spread to the rest of the country and led to great success for the Civil Rights movement. However, as the Civil Rights efforts were gaining momentum, the Sweet Auburn district saw a slow decline in its economic prosperity. Various reasons contributed to this decline – the movement of Auburn Avenue’s residential population towards the west side of the City (around Atlanta University Complex), the construction of the interstate bisecting the neighborhood and the general trend of decline for urban downtown areas.

Though revitalization has been slow, many efforts have been made in the past few decades to preserve Sweet Auburn's history and activate economic development. The King Center and National Park Services along with the area institutions have made efforts to revitalize the area. Historic District Development Corporation (HDDC) was one such organization started to activate redevelopment and provide affordable housing.

**Figure 2.1.2:
Political Institutions**

*Top: Odd Fellows Building,
Butler YMCA*

*Bottom: SCLC Offices,
Ebenezer Baptist Church*



2.2 Historic Districts

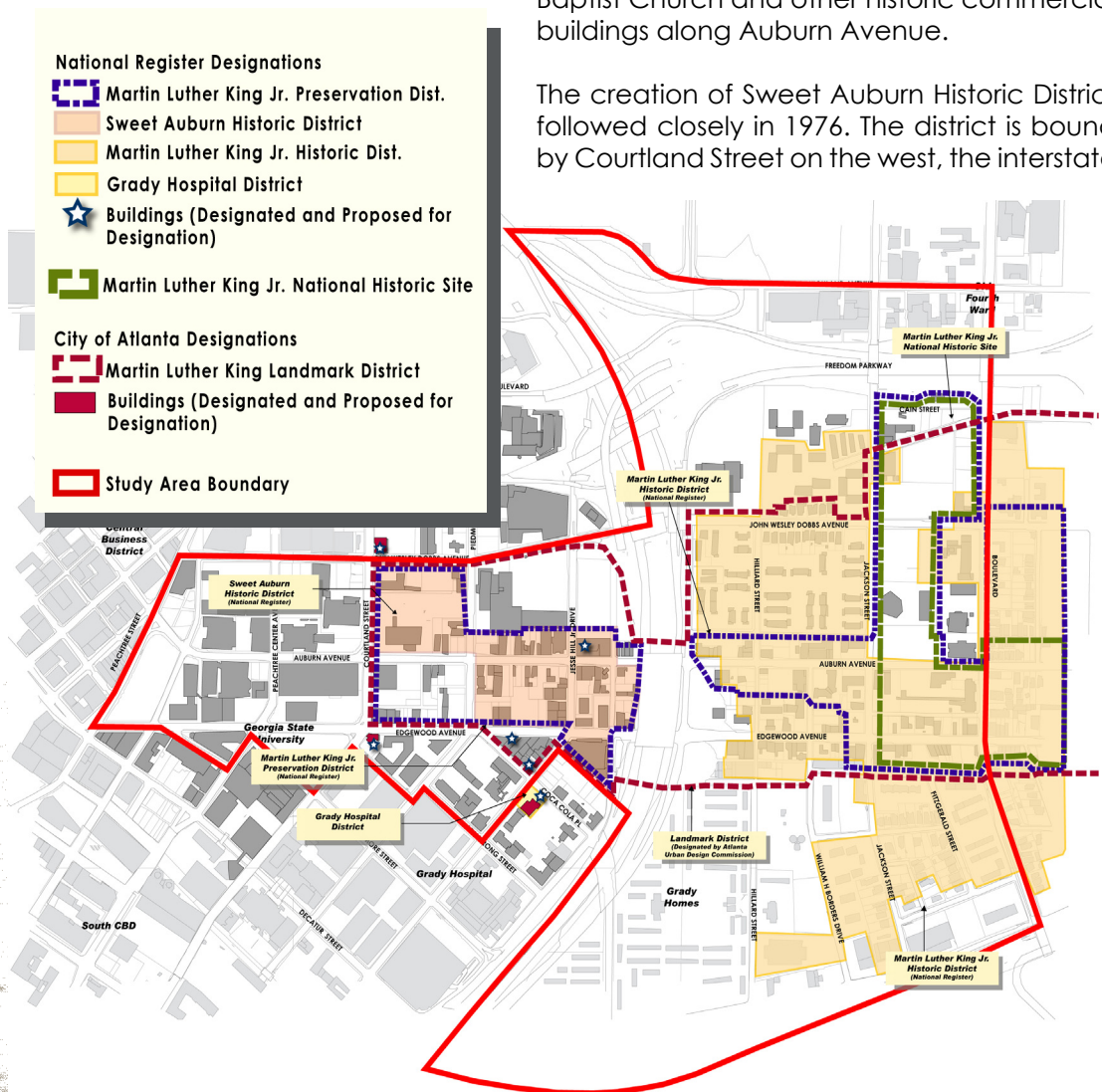
In order to preserve and celebrate Sweet Auburn's extensive history, various historical designations have been created both nationally and locally. These designations range from districts encompassing multiple streets to individual buildings that have architectural and cultural significance. The level of regulatory protection also varies based on location and ownership.

2.2.1 Federal Designation

Several federally designated districts currently protect the historic fabric of Auburn Avenue and the surrounding area. The first such district was created as early as 1974 when the National Register of Historic Places designated the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic District. This district extended east of the interstate from Jackson Street to Randolph Street and from Edgewood Avenue on the south to Irwin Street on the north. It was primarily created to protect the original historic fabric associated with Dr. King's legacy and childhood and included his birth home, the grave site, Ebenezer Baptist Church, single family houses surrounding the birth home and a Fire Station built in 1894. Most of this original district area is now included in the Historic Site property described below. In 2001, the Historic District was expanded to include parts of the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood and parts of the Auburn Avenue District. The new district boundaries include important buildings such as the Prince Hall Masonic Building, Wheat Street Baptist Church and other historic commercial buildings along Auburn Avenue.

The creation of Sweet Auburn Historic District followed closely in 1976. The district is bound by Courtland Street on the west, the interstate

Figure 2.2:
Federal & Local
Historic
Designations





on the east, Houston Street (John Wesley Dobbs Avenue) on the north and Edgewood Avenue on the south; and consists of 190 acres with 10 significant buildings. This section of Auburn Avenue was important due to its connection to the rise of African American entrepreneurship in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Though there is no consistent architectural style that dominates the four blocks within the district, the remaining buildings tell the story of the once thriving commercial market that Auburn Avenue used to be. These include landmarks such as Big Bethel Church, the Herndon Building, the Odd Fellows building and Butler Street YMCA.

Most prominent amongst the protected districts in Sweet Auburn is the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, is a 39 acre property owned by the National Parks Services. The boundary of the historic site extends from Jackson Street to the east, Howell Street to the west, Chamberlain Street to the south and Freedom Parkway to the north. The Historic Site consists of a series of buildings and open spaces which relate the story of Dr. King's life and work, which include Dr. King's birth home, Ebenezer Baptist Church, the Visitor's Center, Peace Plaza, the King Center and Dr. King's tomb. The district boast of over half million visitors every year and hosts multiple educational programs and tours. Twelve years after the original district was created in 1980, the boundary was expanded to accommodate off-street parking lots for the increasing number of visitors, building a visitor's center and providing space for the new Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Preservation District extends beyond the Historic Site to include the Sweet Auburn neighborhood both east and west of the interstate. This district was also created in 1980 with the aim of preserving Dr. King's association with various religious, social and business organizations that were located along Auburn Avenue. It includes and protects numerous historically significant buildings such as the Odd Fellows building, Prince Hall Masons building etc. along with predominately single family houses along Houston and Old Wheat Street east of Boulevard.

2.2.2 Local Designation

In addition to the National designations, City of Atlanta has proactively created a regulatory framework to protect and preserve the Sweet Auburn District. The Martin Luther King Landmark District created in 1989; maintains the fabric of the district and ensures that new development is compatible with the existing architectural and spatial character. The Atlanta Urban Design Commission (AUDC) created by the City of Atlanta in 1975, reviews and comments on any projects within this district that requires rezoning. The AUDC also actively researches, identifies and nominates resources, which may be eligible for historic designation. The Landmark District is subdivided into residential and commercial districts based on existing use and density. These regulations as well as recommendations for modifying the existing Landmark District are described in detail in the zoning section of this report.

2.3 Similar Examples

Other revitalization efforts are - and have been for several years - happening in African-American neighborhoods around the country to tap into the growing potential for heritage and cultural tourism. These places can serve as models for different approaches to historic preservation, economic development, public space, and organizational frameworks. The Imagine Downtown commercial market study prepared for Sweet Auburn recognized the strength of resources in the district, which might be leveraged into a strong package for tourism. These resources are similar in nature to a select few cities which are capitalizing on the renewed interest in African-American experience.

Washington D.C. has many African-American landmarks including the Frederick Douglass Museum, the Langston Hughes house, Howard University, and of course the Lincoln Memorial, the site of Dr. King's 'I Have A Dream' speech. Washington also has the Anacostia Museum and Center for African-American History and Culture. In fact, Washington has so many sites dedicated to African-American history that Cultural Tourism DC (www.CulturalTourismDC.org) has published an individual guide to their African-American Heritage Trail. Outstanding of all the sites in the Heritage Trail is Greater U Street, the "City within a City" that is one of four neighborhood walking tours in the District of Columbia that have printed guides and distinctive interpretive signage (Figure 4.1). Greater U Street is very similar to Sweet Auburn in that it was a thriving neighborhood intensified by the confinement of segregation, and faced serious decay after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was made law. U Street has performance venues (Lincoln Theater, Howard Theater); it has buildings developed by African-American entrepreneurs (True Reformer Building, Industrial Savings Bank); it has iconic restaurants and clubs (Ben's Chili Bowl, Bohemian Caverns); it has places of political activism (Thurgood Marshall YMCA); and it has the home of Duke Ellington. The Revitalization of

Figure 2.3.1:
Ben's Chili Bowl,
Greater U Street



Greater U Street has been helped by the gentrification of adjacent neighborhoods like Adams-Morgan; but U Street has managed to keep a sense of balance where longtime-residents and newcomers can find their place in the wide range of housing. Preservation and development also strike a balance, with some of the latest project specifically looking to the past for inspiration. Continuing neighborhood activism has kept U Street vital, aided by the marketing efforts of Cultural Tourism DC.

Harlem is another neighborhood that is recovering from decline, although Harlem has never been subject to depopulation like similar areas in southern cities. Harlem's Main Street is 125th, the home of the Apollo Theater and the residence of Adam Clayton Powell. 125th is beginning to experience development pressure with the steady rise in Manhattan real estate prices; older historic buildings like the Victoria Theater are being redeveloped, in some cases with a significant amount of additional density in expansions. Alarm over the pace of new development has prompted the New York Department of City Planning to launch the 'River-To-River / 125th Street' study to "leverage the unprecedented public and private investment around Harlem's 'Main Street'" (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/125th/>). The study is in its second year and has dealt with streetscapes, zoning and transportation.

The South Side of Chicago was the destination of thousands of African-Americans leaving the Mississippi Delta region during the 'Great Migration' between 1910 and 1930. Many settled in an area that came to be known as 'Bronzeville' or the 'Black Metropolis' that ran from 31st Street south to Hyde Park. Similar to Sweet Auburn, Harlem and U Street, Bronzeville had institutions like the Chicago Defender which helped promote the rise of African-American organized labor. Bronzeville is a Chicago historic district with its own walking tour (<http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Landmarks/B/BlackMet.html>), but revitalization has proceeded very slowly, occurring in force only around the University of

Figure 2.3.2:
Victoria Theater;
Bronzeville
Streetscape



(Victoria Theater image: New York Times / RDC Development)



Chicago. The city has made a recent commitment to cultural tourism however with the initiation of the 47th Street Blues District. A new cultural center, streetscapes and 'theming' are not without controversy, however; where authentic venues like Gerri's Palm Tavern have been shuttered, transplants from other areas like the Second City Comedy Club have been introduced. The risk of sacrificing the genuine in the name of revitalization is a very real concern for Sweet Auburn.

Finally, Memphis' Beale Street is probably the best-known (and best-marketed) African-American cultural tourism site in America. Beale Street's status as the 'Home of the Blues' came about during the Great Migration, as it was the first stop for many as they left the Delta. Yet, much of Beale Street's iconic status is a result of timing and effort, as the City of Memphis realized the economic potential of the area just as a private investor was willing to fund improvements. Many argue that the pressures for profit undermined the authenticity of Beale Street; certainly the grit of the old district is lost in the over-produced venues and the contrived theming. Nevertheless, most of Beale was restored and the district is a major tourist destination. It has also prompted a new generation of offbeat celebrations in the Beale Street Music Festival and even attracted an authentic industry – Gibson Guitars – to invest in a new plant and visitor center.

Figure 2.3.3:
Beale Street



(Image: www.greatestcities.com)



2.4 The Sweet Auburn Narrative

As part of the 2003-200 Imagine Downtown development plan, a commercial market study was done specifically for Sweet Auburn. In the first few paragraphs the report emphasized the outstanding cultural resources and the untapped potential contained within the district:

"Sweet Auburn represents a gold mine of unexplored opportunity for Atlanta. Heritage tourism is an ever-growing form of travel for Americans and worldwide. While many cities have historic sites or ties to the African-American culture, few have the rich concentration of physical sites relating to the Civil Rights movement and African-American culture. No other city has Dr. Martin Luther King's birthplace and gravesite. A selection of sites along Auburn and Edgewood Avenue include:

- **Atlanta Life Financial Group:** The nation's 2nd largest African-American-owned insurance company, founded in 1905 by former slave Alonzo Herndon.
- **The Royal Peacock:** Originally, The Top Hat Club, it hosted local and national talent, such as well-known artists B.B. King, the Four Tops, the Tams, and Gladys Knight.
- **Auburn Curb Market:** Originally the Municipal Market of Atlanta, located at the 1924 geographic center of the city. Its name today reflects the racial divisions evident during the market's hey day, when Blacks could only patronize stalls lining the curb.
- **Prince Hall Grand Lodge:** Former headquarters of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and former home of WERD, the nation's first African-American radio station.
- **Butler YMCA:** Founded in 1894, it formed many of Atlanta's leaders.
- **Wheat St. Baptist Church.**
- **Ebenezer Baptist Church:** The home church of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- **Martin Luther King Jr. Birthplace,** Grave, Exhibit Center, and the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change.
- **Odd Fellows Complex:** A center of business and entertainment that contained the only movie house where African-Americans could be seated on the main floor.

*While cities have tried to capitalize on the numbers of African-American tourists traveling each year, no one has created a place specifically devoted to honoring the history and the present of African-American culture and the Civil Rights movement."*¹

The introduction to this section talked about the story of Sweet Auburn written in buildings and streets, and because of the protection of the Landmark District these buildings are still with us to continue telling the story into the future. However, preserving and restoring historic buildings is only one part of making the 'Sweet Auburn Narrative' visible and accessible to those who seek to experience it.

The public workshop held on February 26, 2005 asked the neighborhood, "What does Sweet Auburn mean to you?" Out of many different answers came the following thoughts:

- The heartbeat of the area with a vibrancy of African-American life
- Atlanta's most important street, with a cultural, spiritual and historic legacy
- Faith is strong and religious centers abound
- Churches located in the neighborhoods, with bells tolling on Sunday
- A place where the entrepreneurship spirit is strong and thriving
- It is the epicenter of world peace, and civil rights, and impacts the nation and the world
- The cultural and emotional center of Atlanta, the birth of the Civil Rights Movement, and rich in African-American history

¹ZHA Inc. - Sweet Auburn Market Analysis, May 27, 2004

- Leadership and political excellence
- Books, Bucks, and Ballots
- The birth of many organizations and historic fraternal orders
- Food!!!
- A great place to gather, with great restaurants, clubs, cultural events, and historic destinations
- Vibrant and exudes energy
- Past and present entrepreneurs building community and business

In the intersection of these thoughts and the existing buildings lies the Sweet Auburn narrative; the challenge is to translate it into things that can be sensed as unique elements and as a whole. With each building comes people that made it happen; and so one idea may be to include full-size replicas of the person(s) behind the story in each redevelopment – for example, Alonzo Herndon outside the historic Atlanta Life buildings. Another may be to mark the buildings removed by the interstate construction with a 'digital wall' built on the old frontage line that can display archival photos and information related to events happening on the street. Authenticity is critical in keeping Sweet Auburn alive and connected to its past; but authenticity can come in unlikely places, like the unassuming Rib Shack at Auburn and Fort Street, or the Silver Moon barber shop. Every effort must be made by the future redevelopment entity to discern the authentic in Sweet Auburn, and take steps to preserve and enhance it.

Figure 2.4:
Workshop Action



2.5 Preservation And Marketing

Historic preservation is integral to the future of Sweet Auburn. But it is generally recognized that historic preservation is a difficult sell in an urban climate where development pressure conspires to erase the more subtle economic values of preservation. This report has stressed the necessity of unifying preservation and development into a mutually beneficial relationship. Each catalytic project discussed in Part Four takes as its point of departure a historic building or set of buildings, and works to infuse the entire development with the spirit of events that occupied the site. In some cases, the memory of buildings lost is recreated with new construction. Through this approach, each new development is tethered to the Sweet Auburn narrative and each benefits the reading of the entire district.

In this way, preservation provides a built-in marketing device to distinguish each development while building the 'branding' of the district in an authentic way. In Greater U Street, the interpretive markers serve as a reminder that the neighborhood is a work that should be experienced as a whole – yet the markers are irrelevant without preservation. Preservation works to insure that the home of Duke Ellington is not replaced by a townhouse with twice the area and twice the market value; and the presence of Ellington's home works to supply the necessary context for the high-density residential development on U Street called 'The Ellington' (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5:
U Street
Development

